

# THE EXURBANITE: WHY HE MOVED

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PEOPLE move beyond the city limits to escape the insecurities of city life, to recapture a romantic ideal, to cut the cost of living, or to get a better place for their children. So they say. Sometimes their motives are not put into words, even in their own minds. The reasons for making this great change in life, whatever they are, have much to do with the families' adjustment to suburbia, determine how long they stay there, and give an enlightening view of what is happening to cities and to people.

Some parents move to the suburbs because they want to rear their children in more healthful surroundings and a better moral climate, away from city streets, city playmates, the artificiality of urban life, and the temptations that companions of differing social backgrounds and standards may place in their way. Suburbs offer more place for play and creative activity.

Children need a chance to spread out more than they can in city apartments, to have their own rooms, and to have a dog or a cat. The parents themselves get more privacy, and the father can have a workshop.

Educational facilities also are compelling reasons. New buildings suggest an up-to-date educational system that will prepare children to meet the challenges of the changing world.

Parents expect that their children

will be studying and playing with the "right" kind of youngsters.

The homey virtues of rural life appeal to many exurbanites, many of whom have rural backgrounds or are only a generation or two removed from the land. Those who were born in the country recall their childhood, forget the less pleasant aspects, and develop a longing for the open spaces, the green sod, the clear skies, fresh air, and sunshine. Others have heard about it from their parents, or remember summers spent on the farm, or have read Wordsworth, Goldsmith, Robert Frost, and other romantic poets.

In their mind's eye they see an idyllic small community. Neighborly relations will replace the complexities of urban individualism. A more leisurely pace, less crowded living conditions, and the face-to-face relations in the small subur-

ban neighborhood will be much better than the anonymity, coldness, and impersonal character of the city. Clothes will be more casual, personal habits more informal, and friendships more lasting. The smalltown way of life brings government closer to people and may increase their participation in it. Neighbors, not political bosses, make the decisions that determine local policies and services—at least in theory.

The suburb also beckons the status seekers as a symbol of affluence, prestige, and what Madison Avenue calls gracious living. It affords a change of mental clothing for the entire family. The working woman can become the lady of the house. The breadwinner can join the country club. Music lessons and horseback riding for the children may complete the transformation. When a distance of 20 miles separates home and job, status barriers are easily broken. Suburban life has become the American ideal.

Pervasive changes in the daily routine of most urban jobs also are behind the swelling current of exurbanites. There is a monotony in specialized urban employment. Few jobs carry the reward of creative accomplishment. Unlike the farmer, the artisan, and the artist, whose labor can be seen, most persons in the urban labor force do not have a direct interest in the fruits of their labors. As a suburbanite, the urban worker can engage in activities that produce tangible evidence of his usefulness. His garden, lawn, workshop, and home improvements give him a chance to make things that others will see and appreciate. He hopes that suburban activity will compensate for the frustration of his job in the city.

The do-it-yourself craze flourishes in the suburb. Mechanical gadgets may not fit into a city apartment, but they fill the basements and garages of the suburban ranch home. The powersaw, drill, and lawnmower vie with the automobile and the boat in the affections of the exurbanite male.

Suburban homes are seldom completed. A dormer window, a recreation

room, an extra bedroom, a larger garage, or a utility room in the breezeway are projects the exurbanite undertakes. Meanwhile, the normal painting and papering work must be done. Landscaping is an endless undertaking. A flower or vegetable garden, an outdoor fireplace, a swimming pool, or a rock garden consumes spare time.

Some exurbanites hope to find more economical living conditions in the suburbs. They believe that they can get more mileage from country dollars than from city dollars. The pressures for expensive living are less in rural areas. A reduction in clothing costs, entertainment expenses, medical bills, and most service costs more than make up for the added expenses of transportation.

A few subscribe to the chicken-farm myth. They hope that a small vegetable garden, a few chickens, some fruit trees, and perhaps a cow will enable them to reduce food costs to a minimum. They are confident that these ventures into agricultural production will provide healthful exercise, useful activities for their children, and a better, if not a cheaper, table.

The availability of housing at moderate prices is responsible for a large part of the suburban trend. Before the Second World War, most homes were built one at a time for their owners.

The economies of mass production have led to housing developments in which many homes are built at the same time and then offered for sale. Space for a large housing development seldom is available within the city limits, and developers have invaded the hinterland, where they have found land at reasonable prices with lenient zoning regulations and building codes.

Prospective homeowners from the city are attracted to these suburban developments, and they have shown a willingness to commute long distances. Commuting patterns were revised drastically during the war. Wartime jobs expanded normal labor market areas, and wartime housing shortages cemented this pattern. Today a family

does not hesitate to select a home many miles from the place of employment.

The relatively low cost of homes in a housing development and the favorable financing plans that are now available have enabled apartment dwellers to afford a home in the country. Lunchpail suburbs have come into being, and blue-collar and white-collar workers compete each morning and evening on the highways leading to the city.

Migration in the past was tied to economic opportunities, but now most exurbanites are looking for homes, not jobs, in rural communities. They expect to work in the city, although a few and perhaps a growing number of urban residents are attracted to suburbia because of employment opportunities.

All suburbs provide some jobs, and many suburbs are gradually becoming satellite cities. The process takes this form: After the first wave of new families, a number of essential services are provided. Schools, churches, stores, and other basic commercial establishments are built. Then come more specialized shops and services. Shopping centers begin to duplicate the downtown city services. Physicians and dentists move nearer their patients. Medical specialists establish clinics in the area. Soon there is a succession of new establishments ranging from beauty parlors to funeral parlors. Small manufacturing plants and research laboratories begin to tap the suburban labor market, and soon the suburb has become a miniature city. This entire development increases the number and variety of jobs available in the suburb.

MANY OF THE problems encountered by exurbanites in their new environment may be traced to the reasons that prompted their move.

Some fled the city only to find there was no escape from urban influences. Others, attracted by the romantic ideal of rural living, discovered that the ideal state eluded them in the suburb. Very likely their expectations were unrealistic in the first place.

The truth is that suburbs are part of the metropolitan complex. They are dominated by the central city. Life in the suburb is largely urban life; only a few traces of rural living remain. An exurbanite retains many urban ties. If his office is in the city, the part of his life that is job oriented also remains there. He does not immediately sever connections with his urban friends. He returns to the city for athletic and cultural events and many specialized services. His attitudes and values, as well as those of his suburban neighbors, are urban. His loyalties are divided between city and suburb.

The rural ideal he hoped to capture is elusive.

Urban customs and urban values usually invade the suburb long before the exurbanites do. Face-to-face relationships do not develop easily, particularly at first. There is a ravine between newcomers and oldtimers; the newcomers are drawn from such a diverse set of backgrounds that common interests remain hidden. The insecurity and anonymity that plagued him in the city follow him to the suburb. A roomy lot can insulate him from neighborly contacts as effectively as a crowded apartment house.

Exurbanites who fled the city to strengthen family ties may find that dispersive forces in the suburban life have weakened life within the family. In the suburban family, mothers live in one world, fathers in another, and their children tend to seek a third world. The breadwinner becomes a nightly visitor to the home. The mother must maintain the home, do the work of both mother and father, and somehow retain her own personality. In the process, the children gravitate to their peer groups, from whom they receive recognition and a system of values. Parents complain that they have less time to spend with their children than they had in the city. Suburban life not always has fostered closer family ties; often it has made the ties more tenuous.

The do-it-yourself movement, a part

of the suburban trend, also has its shortcomings. The workshops, the barbecue pits, and the swimming pools require time as well as space, and time soon becomes precious. The father who undertakes house painting and plumbing repairs is usually a slow and inefficient worker. He soon finds that huge chunks of his leisure time have been preempted by household chores. His hobbies and avocational interests take on the urgency of regular work.

His wife may discover there is little time for gracious living in a suburban setting. The second car that was to take her to afternoon teas and bridge clubs may become her prison. She is continually on the move. Her children must be driven to school, the homes of friends, the doctor and dentist, the movies, the park, and the playground. Meanwhile, she has trips to the supermarkets, the shopping centers, the downtown department stores. Her husband has become a handyman; she has become a chauffeur.

ONLY A FEW exurbanites find that they can take an active role in the local government. The oldtimers manage to remain in power long after their numerical superiority is lost. In most rural communities, active participation in local government affairs is time consuming and thankless. Newcomers want and obtain few elective offices. One exception is the school boards, on which many exurbanites serve. Elsewhere, the exurbanite is content to let someone else worry about local politics and local government.

Most of the conflict with the rural community is in public services. Exurbanites hope to obtain the advantages of rural living without sacrificing the comforts and conveniences of urban life. The newcomers are accustomed to urban services; the oldtimers are satisfied with the status quo. Roads, schools, police and fire protection, sidewalks and street lights, trash collections, planning and zoning, industrial development, water supply, sewage, and health services can be-

come points of disagreement. Many suburban communities with a nonindustrial tax base cannot afford the kind and quality of services provided in the city. The rural resident dislikes to pay for services that he has never had and never wanted.

Commuting is a special problem. A large part of the time granted by a shorter workweek is spent traveling between residence and place of work. The early rising, the hasty breakfast, the long ride to the city, and the return late in the day become tedious and upsetting. New roads at first may relieve the congestion, but they also attract developers and a new stream of exurbanites. Highways often breed highways.

The commuter has little time to spend with his family and even less for the community. He becomes a weekend resident. He neglects local clubs, organizations, and activities, and his acceptance as a member of the community is delayed or prevented. Much of the conflict between oldtimers and newcomers can be traced to differences in their timetables.

MOST of the problems faced by exurbanites fortunately are being solved. Not all their dreams about country living have come true, but many have. The exurbanites usually are young people with enough enthusiasm and resilience to meet success and failure. They are developing a new way of life in the United States. They are the pioneers of the 20th century.

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